

Message Text

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TAGS: PFOR, PINT, MT, VT

SUBJ: MINTOFF, THE ARCHBISHOP AND THE CONSTITUTION

REF: VALLETTA 1379; ROME 11981, 11405

1. BEGIN SUMMARY. DESPITE REASSURING PRESS COMMUNIQUE ISSUED IN ROME AND VALLETTA AFTER PRIME MINISTER MINTOFF'S AUGUST 19 DISCUSSIONS WITH THE VATICAN ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO MALTA'S CONSTITUTION, THE SUBJECT REFUSES TO GO AWAY. RECENT EVENTS HERE INDICATE THIS ISSUE COULD LEAD TO ANOTHER CLASH BETWEEN THE LABOR PARTY AND THE MALTESE CHURCH, LED BY THE ALMOST 90-YEAR-OLD ARCHBISHOP GONZI, BEFORE IT IS ALL OVER. END SUMMARY

2. SINCE MINTOFF'S AUGUST VISIT TO THE VATICAN, LABOR PARTY SPOKESMEN, INCLUDING MINTOFF, HAVE STATED ON MANY OCCASIONS THAT THE VATICAN HAS "APPROVED" PROPOSED CHANGES IN THE CONSTITUTION WHICH WOULD AFFECT THE STATUS OF THE CHURCH IN MALTA, AND THERE IS NO NEED FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION OR CONCERN OVER THIS ISSUE. HOWEVER, MINTOFF HAS CONSISTENTLY AVOIDED GIVING THE PUBLIC OR PARLIAMENT ANY SPECIFICS ABOUT THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES HE DISCUSSED WITH THE VATICAN. IN ADDITION, THE VIEWS OF ARCHBISHOP GONZI ON THE SUBJECT HAVE BEEN, TO SAY THE LEAST, AMBIGUOUS, AND IT HAS REMAINED DOUBTFUL

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WHETHER THE ARCHBISHOP HIMSELF HAS "APPROVED" MINTOFF'S CON-

STITUTIONAL PROPOSALS.

3. ON OCTOBER 15 THE COUNCIL OF PRIESTS OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF MALTA HELD A MEETING, UNDER THE CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE ARCH-BISHOP, ON THE SUBJECT AND ISSUED A STATEMENT SAYING THE COUNCIL EXPECTED THE GOVERNMENT TO HOLD CONSULTATIONS WITH "ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITIES IN MALTA" CONCERNING ANY CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES OF A "MORAL RELIGIOUS NATURE."

4. THIS STATEMENT FROM THE COUNCIL PROVOKED MINTOFF INTO AN OFFICIAL REPLY, WHICH HE DELIVERED TO PARLIAMENT ON OCTOBER 21. IN ESSENCE, MINTOFF SAID: (A) HE WAS "SURPRISED" AT THE ACTION OF THE COUNCIL OF PRIESTS, ESPECIALLY THE ARCHBISHOP'S INVOLVEMENT; (B) THAT HIS GOVERNMENT HAS ALREADY DISCUSSED PROPOSED CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES WITH THE VATICAN; AND (C) AFTER THE AGREEMENT REACHED WITH THE VATICAN, ALL THOSE NOW TRYING TO AVOID HAVING THE CONSTITUTION AMENDED "HAVE POLITICS CLOSER TO THEIR HEARTS THAN RELIGION." IN RESPONSE TO AN OPPOSITION QUESTION AS TO WHEN THE DETAILS OF THE AGREEMENT WITH THE VATICAN WOULD BE PRESENTED TO PARLIAMENT, MINTOFF STATED HE WOULD DO SO ONLY IF CHALLENGED FURTHER BY THOSE WHO HAD ISSUED THE RECENT DECLARATION (I.E., THE COUNCIL OF PRIESTS).

5. IT WAS THEN THE ARCHBISHOP'S TURN TO BE "SURPRISED" AT MINTOFF'S REMARKS IN PARLIAMENT, AND TO ISSUED A STATEMENT OF HIS OWN, OCTOBER 21, POINTING OUT: (A) THAT HE HAD NEVER DISCUSSED PROPOSED CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS WITH MINTOFF PERSONALLY, EITHER IN ROME OR IN MALTA; BUT (B) THE THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE GOVERNMENT HAD PREVIOUSLY SHOWN THAT THEY WANTED GOOD CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN MALTA, AND "IN THE INTEREST OF THIS SINCERE DESIRE TO MAINTAIN THESE GOOD RELATIONS THERE IS NO NEED FOR FURTHER COMMENT".

6. MINTOFF FOLLOWED THIS WITH A SECOND STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT ON OCTOBER 22, EMPHASIZING : (A) THAT HIS GOVERNMENT JOINED THE ARCHBISHOP IN WISHING TO STRENGTHEN THE "EXISTING GOOD RELATIONS" BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE IN MALTA; (B) THAT HIS GOVERNMENT HAD MADE EFFORTS TO KEEP THE ARCHBISHOP INFORMED ABOUT CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES BY ARRANGING FOR MGR.GONZI TO GO TO ROME IN AUGUST TO DISCUSS THEM WITH THE VATICAN; AND (C) LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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SINCE THE AGREEMENT REACHED ON THIS SUBJECT IS BETWEEN THE GOM AND THE VATICAN, ONLY THESE TWO PARTIES CAN CHANGE IT.

7. THE MALTESE PRESS REPORTED ON OCTOBER 23 THAT ARCHBISHOP GONZI HAD LEFT MALTA ON AN UNEXPECTED VISIT TO ROME TO "HAVE TALKS AT THE VATICAN ON THE MALTA CONSTITUTION ISSUE."

8. COMMENT: BASED ON THE SKIRMISHING TO DATE, SEVERAL POINTS

APPEAR MOST RELEVANT: (A) MINTOFF CLEARLY DOES NOT WISH TO NEGOTIATE DIRECTLY WITH ARCHBISHOP GONZI ON THIS ISSUE; (B) THE LABOR PARTY FEELS VERY STRONGLY THAT THE MALTESE CHURCH SHOULD NEVER AGAIN BE ALLOWED TO USE RELIGIOUS SANCTIONS TO INTERFERE WITH THE MALTESE POLITICAL PROCESS, AS WAS DONE IN THE PAST; (C) IN TYPICAL MINTOFFIAN FASHION, THE GENERAL MALTESE PUBLIC REMAINS IN THE DARK AS TO WHAT THE ARGUMENT IS ALL ABOUT. THE PRESENT TEMPEST COULD SUBSIDE WITHOUT MAJOR DAMAGE TO EITHER THE POLITICAL CLIMATE OR CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN MALTA. ON THE OTHER HAND, THINGS MALTESE DO HAVE A WAY OF GETTING OUT OF CONTROL WHEN MINTOFF IS INVOLVED PERSONALLY. IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, THE KEY TO PEACE MAY WELL BE THE DEGREE OF CONTROL THE VATICAN DECIDES TO EXERCISE OVER THE ARCHBISHOP AND HIS MORE CONSERVATIVE (ANTI-LABOR) PRIESTS. PERHAPS THE ARCHBISHOP'S SECOND FLYING VISIT TO ROME WILL CLEAR THE AIR. ANY ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO EMBASSY ROME ON THIS SUBJECT WOULD BE APPRECIATED. SMITH

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